

Bark like a God

The babes are deep in the ground, nestled in tangled root and wriggling worm. Their double crowns of tallow curls are flattened by earth packed down by groundskeeper James. They are asleep under the big trees which crack in the November nights, and we try to ignore the sounds through thin whistling windows and sheets which let the light in. This is what Lady says, voice seeping through the door without showing her face - she didn't show her face tonight. She says they sleep soundly as bugs, and we need never worry about them even when the weather is bad and the haar rolls in over the water. I lie under my sheet with a little torch, pressing it to one side of my hand and staring at the peachy glow that appears so that I know I am real and warm.

Today I make magic. The bucket in the woods has filled with water overnight and the surface skin spins gently in the light breeze. It used to be there so pheasants could drink from it and stay happy and healthy, but I have never seen a pheasant in these woods. I only looked at them in books. The girls all dull and brown, and the boys bright and colourful and pretty. There are dead insects on the skin of the water, their bodies dance and whirl and that means the water becomes more special with each spin because it gets infused with their spirits. This will make good magic. It needs more colour and I turn into the wood, moss carpet flecked with spots of sunlight that I walk through. The flickering light makes my eyes go funny. I find snowdrops, little purple sprigs, bits of fern, frilly rhododendron and I scratch bits of blue lichen off of a tree with a stick.

There are no colours inside the house. I always have to find them somewhere else and bring them back. My job that makes each day pass. I prepare each bright flower and feel them, calculating how much of each delicate ingredient will have to go in the bucket. I have not seen the Lady today, only groundskeeper James by the shed which we are not allowed to go near. He is old and uninterested by the colours I find. The babes enjoy my colours. They like to watch and laugh in funny ways as I mix up the potions; they try to eat bits of petal and leaf that got stuck to the stirring stick and laugh more when I scoop the colours from their dribbling mouths. Today I will put lovely colours on top of the ground where they sleep, by the cracking November trees, and maybe they will dream.

Then I am punished. My flowers found and They grew red with anger, scary and violent and tall over me. Over my head She snapped with a thick leather belt, wooden spoon and cream

bottle dashed on the wall. My hands are pink lumps, stingy bits across my veins like the worst kinds of nettles and I cry a bit on top of them, trying to imagine the wet was healing when it was just warm. What was I thinking what I was thinking it's just because I am a boy who can't behave himself.

There is a school jotter and a blunt pencil, photocopied sheets of black and white paper to the side covered in sums to solve. I am alone in the classroom, where the only colours are in the pictures of the baby jesus, and jesus grown up, and jesus dying on the cross. The Lady said God would punish me. She said She loves me. It's like chewing chalk, biting down on a wooden brush handle, stinging hands and not being allowed to share the colours I find. God is greedy and jesus's blood is red and my hands are red, and my closed eyelids are red, and I tear at my ragnails until the sums are sticky and crusted. That red is mine. Splinters in my gums. She will be back soon. Lady of light. And when she does come back, God and the baby jesus, jesus grown up and jesus on the cross will all look down at me as I go dizzy on the floor all over again.

An early bed. Before the other children who have gone somewhere else. Taken away in a mysterious blackhole or maybe they have been chosen to love. That's what the adults do: they come along every once in a while, and they make a decision to love a child in a bed along from mine and they leave, and they are loved and that's just how it happens. They choose not to love me because I don't smile when I don't want to, and I didn't like when they touch me, and I wanted to look for colours in them but there were none and that means I am not loveable. I have been given pictures of stories in the bible to look at in the dark. The beardy men in cloth garb and pastel robes. The Lady says it's all I am supposed to think about. It's meant to make me good, but every word is like cement in my throat, and every man's face is something that has gone away. I find that I have been holding my breath this entire time. The shed door is clapping. The trees are cracking. A world washed over.

“Fit ye doing son?”

I open my eyes and look up at Groundskeeper James. One side of my face sweats against the damp woolly moss. I was asleep. I was asleep beside the golden double crowns I just wanted to keep them company I wanted to be good.

“Yer shivering, it's time ye get up now. Mon then, up. Afore she sees ye.”

Rough hands hoist my body to sit, the lights of the woods go funny around me as blood rushes around my brain. His fleece smells of pine needles and ferns and dispersed wet soil.

His touch is kind and firm. I want to stay there. But I am hoisted again, this time under my arms and placed onto my feet, unsteady like a fawn; it strayed far from its mother. Eyelids heavy and the world feels like it's made of white. The firm touch returns to my elbow and pulls me along, tugging me through the wood as my socks shuffle over the pine needle carpet, a russet sea. It spirals and spins under my vision before going dark - we have stepped out of the sunlight. The hairs on my arms stand to attention as I stand beside the shed, waiting for Groundskeeper James inside. I am like a dog. I stand guard even when I don't have a higher meaning. The babes are sound asleep, and I am a boy in the shade and Groundskeeper James comes out of the shed and shows me a shovel. We go together to the patch of the woods where I fell asleep, where they lie. He gestures for me to sit and watch, and then he makes the first plunge into the dirt. I sit for a long time. Groundskeeper James continues to shovel the soil, deeper and deeper with no end. I do not understand. Nothing there. Black hole. It is empty, and I don't know what to do which makes me fall forward, still like a dog, I paw the dirt I demand answers. He is pulling me back and I'm still holding the dirt and it is all just brown and black and there are no colours at all.

Cold bathtub and off-coloured water and dentist seat teal. They told me I am being a boy. Making a silly mess and being disruptive. Brown iodine stains each wrinkle of my fingers, each nip means a bacteria dies. The big light is flickering, every five seconds it stutters and makes it feel like I'm blinking too many times. Eyelids like insect wings. I skim my hands beneath the surface of the water, ripples shifting and dividing over my stinging hands which are now scrubbed clean, no more dirt to be seen. There was dirt on their faces, I tried to wipe it off but there was so much of it. It smudged like soot, and it was all over my hands, maybe in my mouth because the air tasted burnt. Wet tongue over a fireplace feeling.

I had a teddy called Sooty; he was from a tv programme that the Lady remembered but I wasn't born yet, and I don't know where he is now. There are deep voices outside the door that tickle the walls, vibrations that shiver the walls of the bath. I am being very good and well behaved, sitting here and being clean. I am still good when the door opens, and a man comes in that isn't the Lady or Groundskeeper James. His clothes are clean and pointy. He smiles in a way that makes his lips disappear. I copy. I wrap my arms around my chest. Showing teeth, appease, appease. He turns his head and talks out of the door the wrong way. A woman's voice comes back. A towel comes through into his hands and he approaches quietly. He gives me the towel and says his name is Mark and he is here to help me. I tell him I can't get out the bath because I'm not clean enough yet. He does another skinny smile and

says it's ok and then I'm standing on the tiles with a towel around me and the Lady and God and Jesus will be really angry at me.

The hair is in and I stand a bit damp in clothes Mark and the woman found for me. She introduced herself as Carolyn. Carolinn. I don't like that I can't see out the windows and I tell them that, but they just make the smiles and say it's ok again even though it isn't. I'm wearing a jumper that belonged to a boy who used to live here; he liked to kick doors and cry and climb trees and read. He left all his things behind when he went away. The black hole that is out there. The Lady told me to take him as an example of how not to behave. Mark and Carolyn ask me if I would like to take them to my room and get my things because we are going away on a trip, and I can tell it's one of those questions that means I need to do as I am told. I get up and walk there in silence, the shuffling of adult footsteps behind me; I go through the door that they pause at I think they are scared which I find funny. My bed still has all the bible pictures spread over it and I put them neatly in a pile at the side. I turn to them and ask if I need to bring the pictures with me on the trip. Carolynne says only if I want to and steps into the room and it feels like it's another one of those trick statements adults give so I keep the pictures in case I get in trouble. The fog is so thick I can't even see the cracking November trees and I say that out loud. Mark asks what the cracking November trees are. I turn to him, and I am about to explain when my body makes me cry and I am stuck in the silence holding the pictures of good people.

The backseat of Carolyn and Mark's car, blankets over me and her hand rubbing my hair. Black car seats, distant flashes of blue, mumbled outside voices. I ask if I can go outside to look at the colours. Caroline nods and shifts out of the car at the same time. I am all unsteady legs, the fawn with no Groundskeeper James who has gone somewhere that I don't know but that is always what happens to the people here and I don't panic. They just go. I see my bucket by the shed. I turn to Carolyn and tell her I make magic quite often in my bucket. She smiles, benign, and asks me how I do it. I say it's with the colours I find though it's hard to see them today because of the hair. She repeats hair with an English accent and it sounds wrong. I frown and turn my back, choosing to scan for the ingredients in the wood which is heavy looking with hanging clouds of fog. I run the patches of heather strands through my palms, feeling each ridge and bump of the plant that had yet to fully flower. I want to cry so hard that I will be sick. Some purple sprinklings come away in my hand and I cup them to my chest, with ceremony I line the bottom of the bucket with the sweet-smelling hue. There are

people in yellow jackets all over the emerald moss and wilting dandelions. The bucket drips with condensation and swishes with the collected rainwater, a big dead spider pirouetting on the surface. Its spirit is in the magic now. Soundly like bugs. Carolyn watches me work and I feel very professional and serious. There are big dogs on leads sniffing around the woods and I get a bit anxious that they will eat any mushrooms before I can put them in the bucket. I mix a bit more, watching them out of the corner of my eye. Mark comes back from the house, pointy shirt, and coat. He mumbles in Caroline's ear, her blonde hair falling over shoulder. She turns to look at me. I keep making magic.

The babes are deep in the ground, nestled in tangled root and wriggling worm. Double crowns of tallow that do not melt because magic exists, and colour keeps breathing. Yellow jackets and tents. I think God fell asleep a long time ago and hasn't noticed what's been going on. The car is moving. I am strapped in tight in the back seat and we are going on the trip, Mark, Carolyn, and Me. They talk in the front seat quietly to one another. The sun whips in and out of my eyes as we pass by flashing trees and dappled leaves. Crunch and jump over uneven country road and protruding roots like lumpy veins. They play music on the radio and Mark turns round and says it's the waterboys. I melt into the seat and wipe sprigs from my chin. I watch the world through my eyelids. I am awake and asleep forever.